

U.S. IS EXPELLING 55 IN LATEST REPRISAL ON SOVIET ENVOYS

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 21 — The United States, in a surprise move, today ordered the expulsion of 55 Soviet diplomats by Nov. 1. The action was in retaliation for Moscow's ouster on Sunday of five American diplomats.

It was the largest number of Soviet diplomats ever expelled at one time from the United States.

In Moscow, the Government press agency Tass termed the move "another step aimed at worsening Soviet-American relations." Before the American announcement, Gennadi I. Gerasimov, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, said: "If the U.S. side insists on a continuation of the game according to the 'tit-for-tat' principle, all this may go on endlessly. It seems to us that it is time this whole affair be rounded off."

U.S. Began the Expulsions

The American action affects personnel at the Soviet Embassy in Washington and the consulate general in San Francisco. It is the latest in a series of expulsions that began Sept. 17 when the United States ordered 25 members of the Soviet Mission to the United Nations to leave on the ground that they were intelligence agents.

American officials disclosed for the first time that the Soviet Union was warned last month that retaliation for the ouster of the 25 would result in a countermove in which the entire Soviet diplomatic presence in the United States would be sharply reduced.

Coming nine days after the Iceland meeting between President Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the increase in expulsions raised questions about the effect on Soviet-American relations and prospects for a summit meeting in the United States.

Not Discussed in Iceland

The two leaders had been expected to discuss the original expulsion of 25 Soviet diplomats accredited to the United Nations, and the Soviet threat of retaliation. However, with attention focused on arms control, the expulsion dispute did not come up.

Today a State Department official predicted a chill in relations and a further Soviet retaliation. But a State Department spokesman also expressed the hope that the damage to relations could be contained.

"We remain committed to pursuing the dialogue stemming from the Reykjavik meeting in all areas of our relationship," said Charles E. Redman, who had just been made the new State Department spokesman.

The expulsion of 55 diplomats from the United States seems to be the second largest such expulsion from a Western country. In 1971, Britain expelled 105 Soviet personnel. In 1983, France expelled 47. In those incidents, the Soviet reaction was muted. It expelled 18 Britons, and took no action against France.

Last year, however, Britain expelled 25 Soviet personnel, and this led to a prompt retaliation in which 25 Britons were ordered to leave. When London followed by expelling six more, so did Moscow. At that stage, a truce was declared.

Today's expulsion order, announced by Mr. Redman, had two parts.

The first part, which had been anticipated, reacted specifically to the ouster of the five Americans from the Soviet Union. It ordered five Soviet diplomats — four at the embassy in Washington and one in San Francisco — to leave, in direct retaliation for the expulsion of four from the United States Embassy in Moscow and one from the consulate general in Leningrad. The names of the five Soviet diplomats were made public.

The second part, which was unexpected, ordered the expulsion of 50 additional Soviet personnel — 38 from the embassy and 12 from the consulate.

These 50, whose names were specified in a note to the Soviet Union, but were not made public, were expelled to establish "strict equality in numbers" between the American and Soviet diplomatic personnel. This had long been a goal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and had been called for by Congress, to reduce the Soviet capacity for espionage.

"The problem of espionage is a big problem," Mr. Redman said, "and an important one, but it is a separate problem. As I said, our plan is to go on with the dialogue, but at the same time,

as you can see by this action, we will certainly do everything we can to prevent this country from being used as a haven for espionage."

Since the Soviet Union traditionally uses its own nationals for service functions in diplomatic missions and the United States hires local nationals for service jobs such as drivers, janitors, receptionists and laborers, there has always been an imbalance. By agreement the Soviet Union was allowed up to 320 personnel.

U.S. Seeking a Level of 251

As of today, Mr. Redman said, there were 301 Soviet personnel, 263 in the embassy in Washington and 38 in the San Francisco consulate. The cutback of 50 will bring the total to 251, equal to that of American diplomatic personnel in the Soviet Union — 225 in the em-

bassy in Moscow and 26 in the consulate in Leningrad. The United States also has 200 Soviet nationals on its staff, while the Soviet Union is believed to have no more than 10 Americans.

Until today, the State Department hesitated to seek equality on the ground that this would touch off a Soviet retaliation. Instead the State Department favored bringing its level in the Soviet Union up to that of Soviet personnel in the United States.

Oleg M. Sokolov, the minister-counselor of the Soviet embassy, was informed of the American move this morning at the State Department by Thomas W. Simons Jr., Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian affairs.

On Monday, State Department and White House officials not directly involved in the issue said they were confi-

dent that the United States' response to the ouster of five American diplomats would be measured.

But according to various sources, President Reagan, in a meeting of his advisers on Monday, was persuaded by Attorney General Edwin L. Meese 3d to crack down by carrying out a previous threat to cut down the size of the Soviet official missions to the level of the American missions in the Soviet Union.

It could not be learned whether Secretary of State George P. Shultz had opposed the idea.

The five Soviet diplomats ousted in direct retaliation for the five Americans and publicly identified are Vasily Fedotov, Oleg Likhachev and Aleksandr Metelkin, embassy counselors; Nikolai N. Kokovin, an attaché for science and technology, and Lev Zaitsev, a consul in San Francisco.